

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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SYNOPSIS OF The Mystery of Graslov

CHAPTER I.—Prince Neslerov wants to marry Frances Gordon, the charming daughter of an American who is building the Transiberian railroad. Frances is interested in the fortunes of Vladimir Pauloff, a stalwart Russian blacksmith. She asks Neslerov to use his influence for Vladimir. II.—Neslerov goes to Vladimir's hut. The blacksmith has talent and shows Neslerov a picture he has painted. It is the portrait of a woman of rank copied from a miniature. The prince is excited and asks for the original. Vladimir's father says it has been lost. To Vladimir old Pauloff confesses that he lied to Neslerov and still has the miniature. III.—Neslerov has the Pauloffs sent to Siberia as nihilists. IV.—Frances Gordon goes to the forge with books for Vladimir. At the door of the lonely hut she encounters Neslerov. The prince presses his suit violently, and Frances stuns him with a pistol shot in the head. V.—Gordon wishes his daughter to marry Jack Denton, an American bridge engineer. Frances demands that her father intercede with the governor for Vladimir. They start for Old. Neslerov boards the same train, which breaks in two, and Neslerov has Frances alone in his power.

CHAPTER II. AN AMERICAN GIRL'S VIEW.

ANOTHER glance from the window showed Frances that the car had come to a stop near a new bridge over a branch of the river. Involuntarily she sighed for the man who had built that bridge—Denton, whose eye was keen and steady, whose muscles were of iron. But Denton was miles farther on, at the Old.

"Now," said Neslerov, as the girl sank back in her seat, "let us face this situation, my dear. Let us realize the true significance. We are practically alone, you and I. Save for the poor wretches in that village yonder, we are the only people on this earth just now. Can you realize the fullness of that statement? You are mine—absolutely and wholly mine."

"Oh, you cur! You coward!" exclaimed Frances. Her hand went as if by instinct toward that pocket from which she had drawn her revolver on a previous occasion. Neslerov saw her face turn whiter still, and he laughed pleasantly.

"Of course I guarded against that," he said. "I knew you would, with your American impulsiveness, try to shoot me again. So, while you slept, I quietly took your little toy pistol from your pocket. I have it here. This, I believe, deprives you of the power to do any more mischief."

"Oh, you miserable coward! You thief!" said Frances in a tense voice. "I wish there was a good American fist here to strike that grinning face of yours!"

"Undoubtedly," said Neslerov, with an exasperating coolness, "that would be pleasant for you, but it would be unfortunate for the American who owned the fist. One blow—poor! He would be torn apart by my agreeable savages yonder."

She could not resist the temptation to follow his finger as it pointed through the window on his side of the car. A short distance, on the banks of the stream, she saw a wretched, miserable village of rude huts. Men and women, dressed in leather, undressed skins, heavy cloths from Moscow merchants, stood in groups, all with their faces toward the car.

"Were I to say the word," said Neslerov, "these people would tear you limb from limb and would perform the same agreeable service for any fool who attempted to interfere between us."

"You believe that now while you are in the heat of anger, but a short period of rest and contemplation will show you the folly of your refusal. Think of this. I shall go out now and obtain some food. We may remain here a week. Who knows? Before I leave you I wish to say that until you consent to have the priest of that village make you my wife you shall not be permitted to leave this car. I much prefer, as would any man, a willing bride; but, denied this, I will compel you to obey. It will be the worse for you. I offered love—an affectionate embrace. You refused. Now I command! Think this matter settled only when we are married."

"Never! You have my revolver and, I suppose, one of your own. Shoot me if you will. I will not marry you!"

"It will not be you I shoot. What do you think your father will do when he finds you are left behind?"

"Without doubt he will obtain a special train and come here after me. Then, Prince Neslerov, beware!"

He smiled like a wolf and showed his teeth.

"That is what I wanted you to say. If when your father comes here you are not my wife, I will shoot him dead."

"You dare not!" she gasped.

"I dare anything. No report of mine would be discredited at St. Petersburg. I could prove that your father was a conspirator against the government and was shot while fighting my soldiers."

"There is a government of the United States of America?"

"True, but at a distance. I do not fear it. But consider what I have said. I will return with food."

He left the car, securing the doors to prevent her escape. When she saw him striding toward the village, she leaned against the window and studied the rude people.

"I am helpless—absolutely helpless!" she moaned. "Oh, if he had not taken my revolver I could have shot him—or myself."

She looked about her for some method whereby she could, if the need should come, take her own life rather than submit to his demands. She knew that if there were a priest in this squalid place he would obey Neslerov, and mumble some words perfectly meaningless to her, but which would give Neslerov power over her. She walked the length of the apartment like a caged lioness.

Women turned into their huts and came out again. She saw Neslerov start back toward the car carrying a wooden tray. She shuddered again.

"God give me strength, courage, calmness!" she murmured. "To lose consciousness would be to fall a victim to him."

She nerved herself to meet him as his footsteps sounded on the platform. The door opened, and he entered with a bowl of gruel, some steaming potatoes, roast fowl, coffee and some coarse bread.

"It is not quite like our usual fare," he said, "but it is better than being hungry."

He set the dishes on a table he improvised out of the back of a seat. He had a large traveling bag with him, and from it he took a bottle of wine.

"We will pledge each other," he said, with a laugh.

"I do not wish any," said Frances.

"Come, don't be childish! Let us get over the unpleasant part. Drink a toast to your future husband!"

"I will not. I will not touch it!"

"Drink—drink my health!" he commanded.

"I will not!"

"I will make you!"

He held the cup in his right hand.

With his left he grasped her by the hair. He bent back her head.

"Open your mouth. Swallow the wine. I will choke you!" he cried.

With a powerful effort she wrenched herself free and to her feet, and the wine went to the floor with a smash.

Her eyes were glaring with desperation. She clinched her fist and rained blow upon blow upon his face.

Curses deep and terrible burst from him. He clutched her round the waist and struggled with her. She exerted all her strength. She was like a ferocious tigress. Her nails scratched his face and tore his hair. Her blows cut his lips on his teeth. But he was a powerful man and used his strength against this captive woman. With a gasp she succumbed and sank helpless and exhausted almost in his arms.

"Curse you!" he spluttered between his swollen lips. "I have wasted my kindness on you! I should have starved you. But I will delay no longer. I'll drag you to the priest and be-

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minutes you will be the Princess Neslerov—and my slave for life. I'll break your heart, you devil!"

He closed his arms tightly about her and dragged her from the car. The villagers stared in astonishment as they saw him coming toward them with his burden.

"What means this strange happening, little father?" asked a woman of an older man of the village. "Is the man killing her?"

"Let her!" growled the man. "Use your eyes in your house, but meddle not with others. The man's gold is good. He will not hurt her. She is probably his wife."

Russian wives are accustomed to cruelty from their husbands. A beating is but part of their demonstrations of authority as head of the house. The women looked on with apathy, while the men smiled.

"He has married a Tartar," they said among themselves.

"Help! Save me from this man!" gasped Frances as Neslerov half dragged, half carried her into the nearest group.

"Where is your priest?" Neslerov demanded. "Get him at once. Not only he, but all in the place, will receive pay. Call the priest at once!"

"Save me! I am an American! Gordon—the man who built the road—is my father!" cried Frances, struggling again.

A bent old man was seen shambling toward them.

"Come," said Neslerov roughly. "This young woman and I are to be married. Hurry. We have been left behind in that car, and to save her good name she must become my wife. Proceed!"

"Not for pity's sake, do not!" cried Frances. "My father will pay you well! Do not compel me to marry him! I hate him!"

"I command you to marry us!" shouted Neslerov.

A tall man of about middle age stepped from the crowd.

"It is wrong," he said. "Who you are I know not, but it is not the way to win a wife. Release the young woman. Let us hear what she has to say."

"What she has to say! Curse you!" howled Neslerov. He did release her for a moment and sprang forward. His fist shot out against the man's face. Without an effort in his own behalf he fell.

"I am Neslerov, governor of Tomsk!" shouted the prince, now perfectly frenzied. "I command you, old dotard, to say the words that will make this girl my wife."

"Please do not!" cried Frances. "He has stolen me from my father! He is a cruel monster! I cannot marry him!" "He is his excellency, the governor," muttered the old man. "We must obey."

Neslerov seized her by the wrist and swung her toward the priest. The villagers crowded round, awestruck at the great name they had heard. They knew the governor. Many of them had felt the knout at his command.

"It must be done," again muttered the priest.

"No, no!" cried Frances, trying to wrench away from Neslerov.

A boy slid quietly away from the crowd and ran.

"Stand there, curse you!" said Neslerov, grasping Frances by the hair. The pain of his rude hand on her lovely hair made Frances cry out in terror, pain and shame. "I'll kill you if you move again!"

There was the sound of a quick and stealthy tread. There was a swish in

the air—there was a gasp, a murmur from the crowd, which fell back in consternation.

A heavy Russian riding whip swung through the air in an arc and, descending, cut the skin across the face of Neslerov.

"Curse you!" said a hearty American voice. "I'll have your life for this!"

"Jack! Oh, Jack!" cried Frances, and then, the last vestige of her strength deserting her, she fell unconscious into Jack Denton's outstretched arms.

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